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The Collapse of Spatial and Temporal Barriers in Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities

Abstract: Italo Calvino probes the uttermost reaches of time and space in Invisible Cities by creating fantastic worlds of words through historical moments. The varied spatial worlds portrayed in Calvino's novels are highly fantastic and fictional as well they have reference to the current world too. The collapse of spatial and temporal barriers affects the order of the literary pattern and results in Intertextuality, fragmentation, instability, multiplicity, chaotic narration, semiotic obliteration and finally ends up in zero development. It ultimately blurs the boundary between fiction and reality. Though all of Calvino's works are constructed transcending time and space, this research specifically explores Invisible Cities as this novel marvelously surpasses time and space to create incredible and exciting worlds. Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities, an intricately woven story of young Marco Polo and the aged Kublai Kahn, is an accomplished work transcending time and space to provide a glance on the very essence of life itself.

Key words: time, space, worlds of words, historiography, metafiction

In The Condition of Postmodernity, David Harvey postulates the theory of Time-space compression as any phenomenon that alters the qualities of and relationship between space and time. Time-space compression disoriented and disrupted every walk of life and

made an impact upon political and economic practices. It occurs as a result of technological innovations that squeeze spatial and temporal distances, including technologies of communication, travel, and economics. According to Harvey, the need to overcome spatial barriers opens up new markets, speeds up production cycles, and reduces the turnover time of capital. The innovations made in technology shrunk time and space and everything becomes instant. The new technologies of electronic control resulted in just-in-time delivery which considers twenty four hours a long time in the global market. The speeding-up tendency of globalization is reflected in the postmodern literature through transcending or escaping time and space.

One of the features of postmodern novels is to organise narrative time in non-linear fashion and to present the story line as fragmented and disrupted. This has been a feature of modernist fiction as well. In postmodern novels, there are no rational explanations for the time slips that occur between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries and, in some respects, the novel is a problematisation of that rational thinking that seeks causality and linearity. Non-linear time is incorporated in the fabric of the real, not distanced from it, so the reader has to accept this concept of time in order to understand the novel. In fact, people in modern societies generally have only one concept of time: time as linear, unidirectional, with a beginning and an end, continually progressing from the past into the future, divided into equal parts.

Literature becomes atemporal when the reader conceives it in imagination and interprets it. Metafiction self-consciously exhibits the kind of reading process which transcends time and space. It allows the reader to observe the textual and linguistic construction of literary fiction. The reader is spatio-temporally shifted from one point to another which confuses the reader and reminds the reader that he/she is currently involved only in the world made of words.

In the 1980s, a type of metafiction emerged with a term 'historiography metafiction' which merges historiography and literature. It makes the reader doubly aware of the process of making history and writing fiction by taking a 'real' historical event as the theme and writing a self-conscious narrative. By doing so, the reader is compelled to believe both history and literature are real/fiction as the boundary between fiction and reality are totally blurred. The writings of John Fowles, Kurt Vonneghut, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco and Salmon Rushdie come under the category which explicitly exposes the creative process and narrates how history is made.

For metafictional writers, the basic assumption is that composing a novel is not basically different from composing or constructing one's reality. Since all of us are embedded within the language, metafiction writers try to examine the process of making a world and thereby making what others consider as reality. In this regard, history can not have the meaning that it had before and consequently becomes provisional. It becomes another form of narrative that may not have a one to one relationship with the facts. What we read under the name of official history may not be a report of the actual incidents of the past but a selection of what historians have considered suitable for others to read.

The concept of different worlds which can be located in different time, space or other dimensions has always been present in the genre of science fiction. Calvino's application of Intertextuality helps split open the sense of reality instead of patching up the gap and exposes the levels of illusion.

Italo Calvino employs deconstructive strategies to produce an aesthetic construct and he deals with the medium of language and the problem of representation through the dialogues between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo. The beauty of Invisible Cities lies in its original and concise structure and its dream-like imagery. The meeting between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo is allegorically narrated by Calvino. The dialogue between the two oscillates

between what is the actual state of the affair and the emperor's deliberate escape to imagination. The emperor wants to reaffirm the greatness of his realm as he started sensing the decline of his empire. Not to enhance the agony of the great Khan, Polo describes the different cities of Khan Empire that he visited. Failing in his attempt to differentiate among the cities described, Khan finally realizes that all cities described by Polo are one and the same in its core and the difference is shown only through the description of Polo.

The poetic and philosophical beginning of the novel echoes a sense of uncertainty. It questions the credibility of the meeting between the emperor and Polo. Also the beginning directly hits at the main theme of the novel- the temporariness of power and authority.

> Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his. In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered, and the melancholy and relief of knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding them. There is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at evening. (5)

When the emperor realizes the futility of his pride over his realm, emptiness overwhelms his mind. The novel expresses this sense of emptiness from the beginning to the end.

Calvino employs Intertextuality and self-reflexive dialogues in this novel. The effect of this is not to reinforce our sense of a continuous reality but split it open to expose the levels of illusion. So, we are forced to recall that the world of the fictional work can never be the real world of our own experience. The malfunction of the frame-break lays the gap between fiction and reality bare. These are the most important metafictional devices that Calvino uses in his Invisible Cities.

As the reader turns the first few pages of Calvino's Invisible Cities, he/ she finds the conventional notion of the novel form getting shattered as the fiction continues travelling layer by layer as though in pursuit of an unattainable goal. As references to planes and airports, San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles crop up in the 13th Century setting based on the interactions between an emperor and his explorer, the reader really marvels at how the author has treated this same setting as a portal to times and places long gone.

Calvino hits the reader's senses and invokes the reader's sense with his vivid description of the cities provoking the reader's memory and providing the experience of living in those cities. His description makes the reader believe that such cities exist in reality. But if we question whether these cities exist, the answer would be they are mirages in the mind. The beautiful and horrific cities take the reader to the other world. The reader is reminded of the current world whenever the phase arises where the existence of the cities described and the position of Kublai Khan as the empire of those cities are questioned. Calvino expresses his view on how he designs his cities through the words of Marco:

> "I have also thought of a model city from which I deduce all others," Marco answered. "It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions. If such a city is the most improbable, by reducing the number of abnormal elements, we increase the probability that the city really exists. So I have only to subtract exceptions from my model, and in whatever direction I proceed, I will arrive at one of the cities which, always as an exception, exist. But I cannot force my operation beyond a certain limit: I would achieve cities too probable to be real. (69)

Calvino constantly reinforces the duality in life of good and evil, age and youth, and beauty and horror. These opposites exist such that our present reality may exist. These forces draw from each other and bring meaning to the reader. The conscious searching for something unattainable is expressed through this duality. Calvino reminds us that what we

experience is a matter of perception. This is illustrated in the city approached by a caravan by land and a sailor by sea. Each sees the other and envies the other's life. They fail to see through the eyes of the other preoccupied with their own selfishness. The longing for wholeness is apparent through the pages of the novel. The property of city itself is a combination of everything- old and new, past and present and a mixture of people from different places. The invisible city exists inside every city outwardly in the form of the mixed group of people representing the mixed culture.

In the dialogue between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, Kublai Khan sometimes deliberately reminds readers to question our traditional reading attitude. Kublai says, "Perhaps this dialogue of ours is taking place between beggars nicknamed Kublai Khan and Marco Polo; as they sift through a rubbish heap, piling up rusted flotsam, scraps of cloth, wastepaper, while drunk on the few sips of bad wine, they see all the treasure of the East shine around them." (104) Obviously this is a self-reflexive dialogue. Normally we appreciate novels because of our suspension of disbelief. We know that what we are reading is not real but we suppress the knowledge in order to increase our enjoyment.

John Welsh in "Erasing the Invisible Cities: Italo Calvino and the Violence of Representation" perceives that the urban sketches in Invisible Cities are the miniature of utopia. Calvino wrote an essay about the French utopist Charles Fourier that contained a section entitled "L'Utopia pulviscolare" in which he describes his "Utopia of Fine Dust":

> Utopia has no consistency. You may participate in the spirit of it, believe in it, but other than on the page it does not come with you into the world, and you yourself do not manage to follow it up. Once I have shut the book, Fourier does not follow me, and I have to go back and browse to find him there, to admire him in all his clarity

and obstinacy…The utopia I am looking for today is less solid than gaseous: it is a

utopia of fine dust, corpuscular, and in suspension. (The Uses of Literature 254-255)

The city itself acts as the agent of semiotic destruction authoring its own discourse,

forcing the traveler to perceive it linguistically as the sign of an absent city. The falsehood is

not in the word but in the city visited. Some cities provide pessimism and some optimism.

The traveler's yearning for reaching the unreachable is what actually described in Invisible

Cities. "Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you

must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara

you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts…." (13-14)

Throughout the description, the reader is reminded of the non-existence of the city. Their

existence through the written pages is reiterated.

Thus Calvino's significant work, Invisible Cities, transcends time and space

expressing the sense of self-consciousness. By creating multiple worlds of words, Calvino

erases the border between fiction and reality.

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